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Systemic Bias in Wikipedia : What It Looks Like, and How to Deal with It

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What it looks like, and how to deal with it

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what it looks like

"Systemic bias is the inherent tendency of a process to favor particular outcomes. The term is a neologism that generally refers to human systems..."

"Systemic Bias", Wikipedia, quoted as of Oct. 19, 2012; http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Systemic_bias&oldid=493766084

types of SB in wikipedia

- systemic bias on Wikipedia replicates the systemic biases of culture at large: racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, majority religion, etc.
- replicates systemic biases of Internet culture: Anglophone, class privilege, "Libertarian" politics, WM
- amplified / modulated by the medium of the Internet:
  - pseudonymized communications
  - self-selected class of privileged, well-educated, technologically-savvy, folks with time on their hands
- various additional biases: pop culture; tech topics; non-academic; current events; corporate / MSM sources; etc.

what it looks like

content bias
- dearth of articles
- inadequate articles
- perspective bias

- editor demographics
- editor experiences
- editor participation, contributions, & retention

what it looks like: missing content

- each red link is a woman scientist without an article
- *Biographical Dictionary of Women in Science*, User: Dsp13

what it looks like : inadequate articles

- shorter & less content
- fewer references
- fewer links in or out
- fewer editors & fewer eyes ==> more bugs, typos, bad writing, uncorrected vandalism
- perspective bias ("criticism" sections; unlinked and uncredited family members of men; non-global perspectives; undue weight)
- ... fewer "Featured Articles", "Good Articles", "Do-you-know" highlights; "Vital Articles".

what it looks like: inadequate content

- the article exists!
BUT:
- inadequate article: overall small article relative to topic's importance
- perspective bias: very little discussion of gender / ethnicity

what it looks like: editor experience

- 8.5-15% of editors are women [various]
- Wikipedians are less "agreeable" & less "open"; cultural expression & tone - conflict, tendentiousness; 24% report harassment [Amichai-Hamburger 2008; WES 2011]
- editor frustration because of deleted/reverted work, or lengthy processes to justify / educate
- Note: WikiMedia Editors Survey 2011 looked at nationality/language; education; motivation & experiences; gender. NOT ethnicity, religion...

why does systemic bias persist?

- editing comes from editors: average Wikipedian
  - white, male [90%], 32yo, college-educated or student, English-speaking, US or European; single (60%); not a parent (80%) [WES 2011]
- Wikipedia culture established that replicates the "average Wikipedian"
- English sourcing
- digital divide

Editor Age Groups
- 40+ 28%
- 12-17 13%
- 18-21 14%
- 30-39 19%
- 22-29 26%

Editor Education Level Completed
- PhD 8%
- Primary 9%
- Masters 18%
- Secondary 30%
- Undergrad 35%

Editor Gender
- Female 9%
- Transgender/transsexual 1%
- Male 90%

Source: Wikimedia Foundation 2011 Editor Survey, April 2011
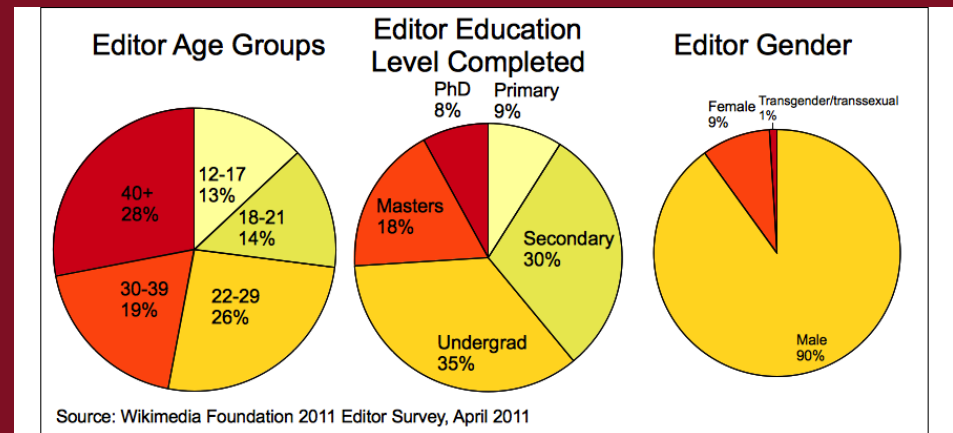
so why do we care?

- #6th ranked site on Internet
- #1 general reference on Internet -- the go-to for wide variety of answers for children, students, academics, press, etc.
- 2.7Bn pageviews in US in 2011

- the good news is that while Wikipedia's failings replicate those of the larger society, and in particular those of Internet society, *Wikipedia is easier to change!*

how to stop worrying & learn to love editing Wikipedia

- "so-fix-it"
  - become an editor (and more)
  - small changes, big changes, writing articles
- understand Wikipedia culture
  - (a) effectively represent your subjects
  - (b) change Wikipedia culture for the better
- change Wikipedia demographics
  - underrepresented interests, skills, and identities

How to make an article bullet-proof: 1
Become an editor

- establish yourself as an editor
  - small edits are fine! typos, refs, facts
- follow the core Wikipedia principles
  - notable subject; neutral point of view; no original research; verifiable sources; you don't own it.
  - editorial behavior: assume good faith; talk about content not editors; avoid conflicts of interest.
- when challenged
  - stay civil, and
  - seek allies & outside opinion: friendly objective editors/admins for 2d opinions

How to make an article bullet-proof: 2
Prepare your content

- Pick a topic
- Review any notability or style criteria for your subject (e.g., biographical; entertainment)
- Find a model: similar topic, handled well
  - copy the source if you are new to Wikipedia!
- Start a draft off your userpage:
  - User:*Lquilter*/*Subject* *(draft)*
- Establish notability: Gather 3+ independent refs with detailed coverage of your subject; OR meet other notability criteria
- Seed wikilinks in relevant articles (e.g., awards, lists, subjects)

How to make an article bullet-proof: 3
Write your article

- ○ Assert notability claim in first sentence / paragraph
- ○ Include relevant categories
- ○ Add references and a references section
- ○ Add a section for awards / 3rd-party recognition
- ○ Add a section for notable works, and in comments or talk describe why the works are notable. Add wikilinks on the notable works if they are independently notable.

references & further reading

- Wikipedia, Systemic Bias
- Wikipedia, WikiProject Countering Systemic Bias
- Wikipedia Editors Survey, 2011
- Lots of coverage in press & blogs. See, e.g., Cohen, NYT, 2011/01/31; Sue Gardner, 2011/02/19.